ALL IN THE FAMILY
John 13:1-9, 33-35
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It is one of the more dynamic passages in the Bible. It is so intense and so intimate that we find it a little embarassing, frankly. The tension is thick enough to cut with a knife. Something is wrong, something out of place, like a picture slightly askew or a vase standing precariously over the edge of the mantel. Thirteen strong friends are about to eat a meal together, but it doesn't feel right and the conversation is stilted and awkward silences keep happening. And as Jesus stood up, in the middle of the meal and took off His robe and picked up the basin and towel they knew immediately what the matter was. In the mounting strain, and the edginess which had erupted into petty sarcasm among them during the hot afternoon, someone forgot to perform that refreshing little gesture of common humanity customary throughout the Near East. No one else was gracious enough to step in and so they sat, stolid, stewing in their isolation as it were, until Jesus washed their feet. And to confirm what each of them experienced in that gesture He told them, a little later, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you...By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Part of the meaning I have always derived from that incident has to do with being a family: the broader family of the Church, the whole family of God's people which tries everything in the world it seems to prove the truth of its Gospel except the one thing Jesus promised would do the job; namely, conspicuous, obvious, visible love for one another. But also a biological family: those little groups of us who sit down at the dinner table every day and often act like the disciples: petty, angry with one another, stewing in our own resentment.

We have trouble with that: with love and family we're very worried about both in this year designated as Year of the Family. Archie Bunker, who made all of us a little more conscious of the joys and agonies of our own families introduced, in the process, four letter words to television. But there was one four letter word he always had a great deal of trouble saying - to his family at least....

One day Edith asked: "Archie, do you love me?" And he responded: "Edith, where in the hell are you getting these questions from?" Edith answers: "Fiddler on the Roof...I heard it before on the radio. And the man in the song, he couldn't answer her directly either." Archie ends the dialogue with: "Well, I ain't no Fiddler on the Roof! I answer that question every day - by the fact that I live with you and take care of you. I go to work and come home, go to work, and come home..." (God, Man and Archie Bunker, Spencer Marsh, p.60).

For a long time that little dialogue described the reality of family, marriage and human relations in general. Men took care of women by working at a job in the world. Women took care of men by keeping a home. And love was defined by how well each role was played. That constellation is no longer adequate. As a matter of fact it no longer remotely describes the reality of the contemporary family. Change is the new reality - the only thing predictable.

Futurist Robert Francoeur suggests that the Victorian culture which shaped the contemporary family is almost totally gone. With tongue in cheek he describes the transitional period in which we live in anthropological terms as the fading of the Victi Tribe and the emergence of the new dominant culture in the form of the Nanu Tribe. The Victis led a harsh life; disease claimed many of them at an early age; many spent most of their lives working in overpopulated cities, in crowded sheds, forty, fifty, one hundred stories above the ground, dressed in curious uniforms characterized by useless buttons

on their collars and ornamental, symbolic pieces of cloth tied tightly around their necks. The male was generally the breadwinner, sex was his act of conquest, deviant sexual behavior was not tolerated, not admitted, sex roles were strong. With the exception of the wealthy there was very little leisure among the Victi.

Unlike the Victi, the emerging Nanu Tribe espouses sexual equality, marriage happens much later and single life is very common. The Nanus are open about sex. Young men and women are often sent off to their own "villages" - known as colleges - where they can freely cohabit for four or five years without interference from their less liberated elders. While the Victi were adicted to work, the Nanu are much more hedonistic. Both cultures show evidence of heavy drug use. The Victis were chemically dependent on alcohol which, with startling frequency, killed them. The Nanu generally prefer a grass-like substance which may be equally fatal. "The name of the tribe itself comes from one of the most important characteristics of the culture - instant and total communication. Thirty minutes after a stranger from another planet arrived, 'Nanu, Nanu' became the greeting of countless younger members of the tribe." (The Futurist, April 1980, pp. 3-12, The Sexual Revolution, R.T. Francoeur).

The changes are rapid and radical and one way to cope is to laugh at them. But some are not very amusing: the demise of the extended family, for instance. I was in a discussion recently that turned suddenly rather serious. A friend, mid-fifties, was telling how empty his house is with the recent departure of the last child. "Particularly when I come home in the evening," he said. "It's deathly quiet." And then, poignantly, "I have leftover love: lots of it! I need kids before dinner, to talk to and play with and hold. I'd be happy to play with somebody else's - in fact, I've thought about walking down the street to see if anybody needs an experienced father for about twenty minutes before dinner."

From time immemorial the word "family" described a social unit consisting of at least three generations of people, genetically related to one another, but also related by reason of common property ownership and geography. It's always difficult to preserve a sense of time when change is happening, but this just changed a moment ago - during my life time. I knew my cousins. My grandfather ate dinner in our home regularly. My children see their cousins and aunts and uncles every few years. The late Margaret Meade observed that the nuclear family - mother, father and children - is a very recent invention, and not a good one at that.

That is probably the most dramatic change of all. All the weight which was once borne by a large group of relatives - grandparents, aunts, uncles - now rests on two parents alone, often living in a strange city with not many close friends. Small crises, which moderate and ease in intensity as soon as they are shared, grow and become major when there is no one near with whom to talk. We have asked the nuclear family to stand alone and it was not designed for that.

The church, the local congregation, can provide a real ministry here. By our very nature we are inter-generational. We are the one functional institution in this society where there is no inherent chronological discrimination. We are, or can be if we simply open our eyes and hearts, and sometimes our arms a little bit, a ready-made, instant, extended family. We can be grandparents, children, brothers and sisters to one another every time we are together. And our Lord's promise is that other people will know the truth of the Gospel if they see that in our relationship.

The extended family, however, has changed and that in turn, has radically altered much of the landscape for family relationships. We learn to be wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, by watching others. And into the vacuum created by the demise of the extended

family rushed television. Accepted behavior is legitimized by television role models. Apologists for the media suggest that television is simply a mirror, reflecting what is happening in our culture. Don't believe it. Television is a profound and powerful influence on human values and behavior, perhaps more powerful than anything the human race has ever encountered. And television is portraying some interesting family arrangements which not only reflect but stimulate radical social change. Popular shows with names like Three's Company, Mork and Mindy, One Day at a Time, Alice, present a variety of living arrangements other than the cozy nostalgia of The Waltons. Yesterday's father got the shotgun out when his daughter stayed out beyond curfew. Today's father has to cope with the fact that the number of unmarried young people living together has increased by more than 800% in the past decade.

Families are changing and one way to cope is to laugh, and another is to wring our hands in fear, and a third way is to romanticize and to celebrate images and meanings that never were very honest. Reading a little Erma Bombeck can be a very healthy reality therapy for the romantics among us. It's never the way it's supposed to be. Every time you try to have family devotions, someone at the table is putting salt into someone else's milk, or an older sibling is snickering into his soup because his younger brother can't pronounce Jerusalem. And each brave effort to discuss the world situation is greeted with callous boredom and impatience to get on with the meat and potatoes. Erma, bless her heart, reminds us that it's never the way it's supposed to be - because it never was.

Precisely because we're a little frightened about the family at the present, we're overdoing it a bit and we're guilty of romanticizing it all. Isn't it silly, after all, to talk about the IBM family, or the Transamerica family of companies? I love the Pittsburgh Pirates, but when Three River Stadium broke into the chorus of "We Are Family" before each game last year, even I thought it was a bit much.

I don't agree with him, but I think we need the protest of French psychiatrist Jacques Lacan who wrote, "family is not an institution but rather a field of misunderstanding on which people at different stages of human development speak to each other with mutual incomprehension." (New York Times, Review of Books, 3/24/80, p.3).

That voice needs to be heard because it is at least partially true. But there is no word about the family more honest than the Bible. In fact, if you're looking for something light and simple and rosy, it's better to read the Gospel according to Hallmark than the Word of God.

The primal family is the scene of disaster. Adam and Eve contribute to each other's moral downfall. One of their sons murders his brother - Noah was discovered in a drunken stupor by his sons and cursed one of them. Abraham loaned his wife to Pharoh in order to buy a little time in Egypt, and after a period of tension between the mothers of his children comes perilously close to killing his son as a sacrifice to Jahweh.

Jacob deceived his father, defrauded his brother, played his parents off against each other, and his sons left their brother to die in the desert. David committed adultery and arranged for a murder to cover his tracks. His children are guilty of incest, betrayal, treason and his commander in chief carries out the assassination of his beloved son Absalom. David's cry "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom" penetrates the heart of every parent who ever loved a child.

The Bible is simply very realistic about the human family. It does not romanticize the arrangement. But it does tell the story of a baby born to mother and father, growing up in a family; God's son entrusted to this curious matrix of relationships. It does tell the story of a savior in the process of dying for the salvation of the whole world,

asking His friend to take care of His mother. The Bible portrays family as a relationship which by its nature is powerful and which, therefore, can be powerfully creative or powerfully demonic.

We know enough, I suppose, about the demonic potential. May I suggest two areas at least in which families can be powerfully creative? The first is in teaching the interdependence of human life. We're having a problem with this at the moment. It is called "the New Narcissism". It is essentially, good old American independence amplified to the absurd. "I need no one. I gotta be me. If you're in my way, you'll have to move. I have to do my own thing. You do yours and I'll do mine, and if we meet - great! If not, so what?" etc. etc. ad nauseum. I'm concluding that part of the reason we're having to deal with an epidemic of selfishness is that a whole generation of parents bought, without even questioning it, the notion that the goal of parenting is to produce independence in one's children. You've read the liturgy. "The goal of parenting is to phase ourselves out." But Ellen Goodman, in a Washington Post editorial wrote, "The PhDs in this post-graduate course in caring build in their own obsolescence...Good parents raise children who are confident enough to leave them. What a deal...where is it written," she asks, "that leaving is what life is all about?"

I am not advocating that children live with parents forever. God forbid. But in our anxiety to do the job right, and not to be guilty of smothering them, we may have lost something important; namely, the interdependence of all human life. We are doing our children no favor when we convince them that they, their concerns, priorities, wants and desires, are absolutely the most important thing in the world. We would do them a far more valuable service to demonstrate their interrelatedness and therefore interdependence with us and their brothers and sisters and classmates.

Second, I think family is where the powerfully creative sense of obligation is taught and learned. And I think the church can be a very helpful support. I would argue that "obligation" is heresy in most of the rest of our culture. Writing in the Christian Century a middle class mother lamented that her children had been taught that they had nothing to worry about, that they had the luxury of saying what they would or would not do from the choice of Blue Jeans to college, and that they were obligated to nobody. "Caring in our culture," she observed, "has come to be equated with getting out of the child's way." (August 15, 1979). Family is where we learn, or fail to learn, the fundamental lesson that we owe a debt - are obligated to the world, the nation, the community, the family and to God, for the simple fact that we are. We didn't earn our being. Our lives were given to us. And I have the notion that you either learn that in the family circle at a very early stage, or it is forever lost.

Ross Snyder wrote somewhere that "a family is a center of healing, a place where you can see that everybody else is on your side, a group of people who actively approve of each other." I have always liked that, but the best part was the conclusion when he wrote, "All is possible only when a family is looking together in the same direction... toward God. For love and creativeness come not merely from looking at each other, but looking together toward a greater-than-any-of-us."

That's true for nuclear families, extended families, and particularly for the family of God's people as they gather as a church. Everything Jesus talked about as life-giving, life-affirming, happens in family, in relationship: things like loving individuals into secure, confident personhood: providing the necessary trust while one learns how to stand alone: being there when life tumbles in and the most urgent need is the security in which to cry.

And family happens when someone loves, not in the abstract, certainly not in the sentimental or nostalgic idiom of romanticism, but as Christ loved. That is to say, families happen when someone can accept the full humanity of others - just as He accepted the pettiness of His brothers; and when someone can forgive smallness and meanness and selfishness long before anybody thinks of saying "I'm sorry"; and family happens where there is grace,which means when someone decides to bear the burden even though it's someone else's turn, and do the dirty work, and perform an act of graciousness without any thought of reciprocity or even a "thank you". That's what a family is, essentially.

It is the best we can ever do for ourselves. We are all in the family, God's family. The shape of things to come is not altogehter clear. What is clear is His love for us, and His constant grace, and His will. May God bless us on our way.

Amen.

Eternal God, we give thanks for Your love and Your special gift of parents, children, brothers, and sisters - and the dear friends who grace our lives. Help us, O God, to enjoy the gifts You give. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.